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## Library Profile: Bibliotheca Alexandrina

Editor

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# Bibliotheca Alexandrina

by **Ron Chepesiuk** (782 Wofford St., Rock Hill SC 29730) <RChepesiuk@compuserve.com>

## The Bibliotheca Alexandrina Opens...Unofficially

**Samia Salah Harris** of Dale City, Virginia, is an Egyptian by birth and a Rotarian since 1994, who has always wanted to do something special for her native country. Then in 1998 **Harris** heard about the ambitious project to revive the memory and ideal of the famous ancient library of **Alexandrina**. In the mid third century B.C., the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina**, as the library is known, was one of the glories of antiquity and a center for culture and learning, but a fire ravaged the Alexandria docks in 47 B.C. during **Julius Caesar's** invasion of Egypt. It was the first of several catastrophes that led to the library's probable disappearance by the end of the 7th century A.D.

**Harris** joined the **Baltimore Friends of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina** and began attending some of their fund raising functions. "**Kathy Mubarak**, the First Lady of Egypt, was the speaker at a function," **Harris** recalled. "She made an articulate and impressive request for help, and I began to think of several ways, that I, as a Rotarian, could respond to her call."<sup>1</sup>

In 2000, **Harris** contacted the Rotary Club in Miser Elgadida, a community in Cairo, Egypt, in an effort to establish a joint book project for the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina**. The **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** will be more than a library," **Harris** said. "It's going to be a center of learning and research not just for the Mediterranean region, but the world as well. It's a great way to promote understanding between peoples."<sup>2</sup>

This past April, **Harris** was one of many **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** friends, many of them librarians like myself, who trekked to Egypt to participate in the library's unofficial inaugural. An official inauguration was initially planned for this past April 23-25, but the Israeli-Palestinian conflict aborted the Egyptian government's best laid plans. More than 80 international friends of the **Bibliotheca** came anyway to see the fruit of their hard work and to discuss future plans.

The Egyptian government canceled the official event after police, using live ammunition, shot dead a student from the adjacent **Alexandrina University** a few feet away from the **Bibliotheca's** steps. Another 69 students were clubbed into submission and arrested. In justifying their actions, the Egyptian government claimed the protest had spun out of control.<sup>3</sup>

But one source, who had witnessed the incident, told **ATG** that the police rioted and blamed them for the violence. The security chief overseeing the police at the scene was quietly fired the next day, according to a source with contacts within the Egyptian government.

The cancellation was to "show solidarity with our Palestinian brothers and sisters, who are suffering" was the official reason given by **Dr. Ismail Serageldin**, the **Bibliotheca's** Director. Unofficially, sources said that the Egyptian government feared the students would use the event to vent their anger. With 60 world leaders and another 300 international visitors coming to the gala, the Egyptian government didn't want to risk an embarrassing incident.

The U.S. State Department issued a travel advisory, cautioning Americans not to travel to Egypt, especially **Alexandrina**, and the American cultural center in Alexandria closed. Nevertheless, friends came from the U.S., Canada, France, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and some other countries. "My reasons for coming were professional," said **Rosalie Amer**, a librarian and member of the **California Friends**. "I wanted to show support for the **Bibliotheca's** staff who had put so much time and effort into preparing for the inaugural."<sup>4</sup>

**Amer** expressed the sentiment of those who attended the quasi inaugural. "While In Egypt this time I saw no differences from the earlier trips I've made," she recalled. "Egyptians may be some of the friendliest people in the world, and certainly, they do like Americans, even though they may not agree with our foreign policy in the Middle East. Of course, some of us as Americans do not agree with aspects of American foreign policy in the Middle East either. Still, I and other Americans were treated with kindness, hospitality and friendliness."<sup>5</sup>

Attendees got a close look at the stunning \$220 million, 11-story complex, an impressive state-of-the-art cultural gem that includes six museums and a planetarium. Workers were still putting the final touches on the complex as the friends toured. The library can house 8 million volumes, but, presently, it contains only about 500,000 volumes. Staff numbers around 500, about 200 of whom are librarians. During the tour, staff demonstrated the online catalog (it worked) and talked about the library's plans for digitization. Interestingly, the **Bibliotheca** has yet to receive a genuine researcher, **ATG** was told.

But for the **Bibliotheca's** **Friends**, the tour was the culmination of twenty-five years of dreaming, conceiving, planning and constructing. "The entire complex of the new **Library of Alexandria** — the library, science and other museums, and planetarium in construction

since 1995-96, and now completed, fulfills a dream of restoring the **Bibliotheca** as a location for peaceful, cultural and scientific dialogues at the beginning of a new millennium in a region not having a reputation for peace," **Amer** said.<sup>6</sup>

A group of Egyptian professors under the leadership of former **Alexandrina University** president **Dr. Loutfy Dowidar** conceived of the idea for the library in 1974, but the group had to work hard for ten years before it was finally able to bring the idea to the attention of the Egyptian government and the international community. Egyptian President **Hosni Mubarak** laid the cornerstone for the new building in 1988.

Negotiations for the contract ate up some time, as did the actual design and construction, but as **Zahrán** pointed out in an interview with the author in 2000, "Six years spent on the design and construction of such a big and technologically new building is not really a long time."

The project, however, did lose some time between 1992 and 1994 when excavations were done at the site to ensure that no important archeological artifacts would be destroyed. "We are really proud to say that the artifacts retrieved from the archeological dig are now on display at **Greco-Roman Museum** in Alexandria and will be on display at the **Bibliotheca** as part of its exhibit program," explained **Rosalie Amer**, a librarian and a member of the **California Friends of Bibliotheca Alexandrina**.

**Bibliotheca Alexandrina** officials and supporters revealed that raising money has been the most difficult challenge to sustaining the project, but that, from its beginning, the project has attracted the attention of governments from many countries, including France, Germany, Italy, Greece, Japan, Norway, Spain, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States and several from the Arab world. Donations have included \$65 million cash from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and the Sultan of Oman; \$4 million from Italy, a sum that is being administered by

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*Ron Chepesiuk and Rosalie Amer.*



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UNESCO and used for preserving documents and for help in establishing the **Bibliotheca's** library school; furniture and experts in Internet communications from Norway; and support from Germany for the purchase of a book transportation system.

Many private organizations and individuals have also stepped forward and contributed books and other materials. Friends groups, for example, have sprung up not just in the U.S. but also Bulgaria, Australia, Greece, Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, among other countries.

Egypt has given 40,000 square meters in land and about \$180 million towards the building's construction, while making a commitment to provide an annual budget for the library's operation, including staff salaries and administrative costs. "Egypt has a limited budget and lots of national and international responsibilities, but it still has managed to provide resources," explained **Dr. Hassan M.E. Azzazy**, an Assistant Professor at the **University of Maryland School of Medicine** in Baltimore and a member of the **Baltimore Friends of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina**. "But the driving force behind the project has been the strong belief in the international community that education, knowledge and libraries are the main tools for progress and prosperity."<sup>7</sup>

Organized in 1998, the **Baltimore Friends** sponsored two fund raising events in 1998 and 1999, which were attended by more than 400 people, produced brochures and other materials for the library, and launched a book drive that so far has collected more than 1000 books in various subjects. "In the Fall of 1999, we began contacting major publishers and other organizations and asking them for book donations," **Azzazy** revealed. "They are eager to participate, so we expect the number of donated books to increase exponentially."<sup>8</sup>

These donations, no doubt, will go a long way towards helping what is certainly one of the most ambitious and potentially significant cultural projects ever undertaken in the developing world. The library is expected to function as a public research library that will primarily serve the countries of the African, Mediterranean and Middle East regions, but it will have global cultural implications as well. "The **Bibliotheca** will serve the social and economic development needs of the region, while being a resource for scholars worldwide that will help them produce quality research work," **Azzazy** explained. "It will also be a valuable resource of information to support decision making and to broaden future horizons for cultural, economic and social development."<sup>9</sup>

**Zahran** added, "The collections will be significant because the **Bibliotheca** is bringing together under one roof many sources of information hitherto essentially unavailable to researchers. That material will include documents,

# library facts

- Total site area: 40,000 sq. meters
- 13 Floors / 3500 Seats
- 100,000 manuscripts
- 200,000 disk/tapes
- Total floor area: 69,000 sq. meters
- 4-8 million volumes
- 50,000 maps
- 50,000 disks/videos

Website: <http://www.unesco.org/webworld/alex/alex.htm>



books, rare manuscripts and other material from the region, covering ancient times to the modern period."<sup>10</sup>

The **Bibliotheca** currently has about 350,000 volumes (including 10,000 rare books) on various topics related to Egypt and the Mediterranean region, and that figure has been projected to grow to 4 million volumes and perhaps double that figure. "I've been impressed with the library's acquisitions rate," **Amer** said. "From my visits to the library, I can see that it is buying wonderful materials from all over the world for its reference and research collections. The library should reach 400,000 volumes by early 2000."<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the research and reference library, the **Bibliotheca** will also contain a multimedia library, a planetarium, an International School for Information Science, a science museum, a calligraphy museum, and a conference center. In 1996 UNESCO proposed and the Egyptian government approved an allocation for the creation of an electronic library for the blind, which will include the latest equipment and software for converting Arabic into Braille on computers. "These many programs and facilities will collectively contribute to the establishment of a new center of excellence for the region and the world," **Azzazy** said.<sup>12</sup>

On April 24, **Mrs. Mubarak**, who has made the **Bibliotheca** her pet cultural project, held a 45-minute luncheon for selected friends and officials. It ran in a brisk assem-


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work. How about the Aid Worker model? Well, the problem with that is that it runs counter to our desire to help people in a deeper way than just handing them the things they need in the moment. (And let's be honest: it also offends our sense of importance and professionalism to be "reduced" to simply handing out books and articles to our patrons.) It also may lead us to undermine

the educational aims of teachers in our colleges or public schools. If a teacher sends his students to the library so they can learn to do research, and the librarians do the research for them, that's a problem.

Obviously, in reality we're going to have to settle for a mixture of these models. Sometimes you have to just give the patron what she needs, and sometimes you'll be able to give some knowledge along with the information. But even though our day-to-day reality will always

be something of a smudge between those two absolutes, I still think we need to decide which of these should be the fundamental model for our profession. Or, of course, come up with a third option, which may be even better. I'm going to keep thinking about this, and I hope those with ideas they'd like to share will contact me so that we can revisit this question in a future column. In the meantime, I'm afraid I bring no answers today. I offer you only questions. 



bly-like fashion, with some attendees later complaining that waiters had taken plates

away before they had finished eating.

The next day, the Egyptian press briefly reported that **Mrs. Mubarak** had visited the **Bibliotheca** to check on its status. "The First Lady didn't mention her meeting with the friends. I was shocked," complained one Egyptian-American friend who attended the luncheon.<sup>13</sup>

At the friends' general annual meeting on April 25, **David Wardrop**, a United Kingdom friends group member, gently advised the **Bibliotheca** administration to make the library more than just a repository for **Alexandria's** history. Please, **Wardrop** added, give the friends more notice if still another date for the inaugural had to be canceled.

**Serageldin** told the gathering that the library would be opened to the public in mid May and that Egyptian government was planning yet an-

other official inaugural for next October. No one knows for sure if that will happen.

But when it does, the challenges for the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** and its friends will have just begun. In the years ahead financing is expected to be the big challenge.

"A developing country like Egypt really can't sustain a project of this magnitude by itself," **Harris** said. "To sustain its operation and maintenance, we hope the international community will continue to provide donations, assistance and expertise."<sup>14</sup>

*Contributing Editor Ron Chepesiuk has recently returned as Professor and Head of Special Collections, Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC. He is also the author of 18 books and more than 2600 articles. He has been writing about the Bibliotheca Alexandria since 1994.*



*Richard Holmquist and Laila Dowidar.*

## endnotes

1. Interview with **Samia Harris**, April, 2002.
2. Ibid.
3. Information about the situation in **Alexandria** was gleaned from interviews, observations and a reading of the local English-language press.
4. Interview with **Rosalie Amer**, April, 2002.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Interview with **Dr. Hassan M.E. Azzazy** in 2002.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Interview with **Mohsen Zahran**, in 2000.
11. Interview with **Amer**, April 2002.
12. Interview with **Azzazy**, 2000.
13. Interview with source in **Alexandria** who wished to remain anonymous.
14. Interview with **Harris**, April 2002.

## I, User — The Unbearable Lightness of Service: Notes on the Customer Experience

by **Rick Lugg** and **Ruth Fischer** (R2 Consulting)

Here at **R2 World Headquarters**, the progress never stops. Since August, we have switched from dial-up to **DSL** Internet access. We installed a wireless **LAN** in our home and office. We turned techno-naturalists, "stalking the migrated email" as the mega-ISP that bought our mini-ISP turned loose our messages without even a GPS device to guide them. ("Sir, sometimes a few get lost along the way."). We attempted, as self-employed citizens, to purchase disability insurance from a company subsequently featured in a "60 Minutes" segment, and still more dauntingly, to comprehend how to file claims on our non-standard health insurance policy. ("The best I can tell you, sir, is don't!")

To cross any of these innocuous-sounding tasks off our to-do list (and prevent them from reappearing there two weeks later) has required the resourcefulness and vigilance of a New Englander in winter...and the soul of a clerk. Although **R2** is blessed with these traits in abundance (especially the soul of a clerk one), our

business plan did not foresee that we would require them *just to be someone's customer!* Perhaps the *worst unintended consequence* of a consuming, technology-driven, customizable-to-your-DNA economy is that *no one understands how the whole thing works!* ("Sir, we only handle billing here. You need to talk to Tech Support...or maybe Customer Care.")

This refrain is so familiar that there are Muzak versions playing while we experience higher-than-average call volumes, but nonetheless **R2's** DSL/LAN/Email record bears further listening, because if you play the third cut backwards, it says "this is a problem in our industry, too." Either that or "**Walt Crawford** wears white suits" — it's hard to be sure. (Wasn't he barefoot on the cover of *American Libraries*?) At any rate, the complexity of the customer experience continues to grow, as does the complexity of the customer service response. It doesn't look like it's stopping anytime soon, and as yet no company seems to have much of a handle on

it. So let's hit the play button again.

Whether you're a librarian or just an ordinary person, when you're ready to buy, everyone is friendly, including the buyer. For **R2**, the promise of infinite bandwidth gleamed brightly, offering still faster access to the **Anderson-Hamaker Listserv Debates**, with **Goodman** and **Watkinson** up in the booth, and **Commissioner Okerson** wondering whom to suspend; mpegs of last year's **ALA Discussion Groups** or the all-important day three of an ILS vendor presentation; live streaming of colloquies on consortial collection development, meetings of standards bodies, and committee organizing sessions; bit-mapped facsimiles of famous consultants' reports—total, real-time professional development! We'll hardly have time to work.

The ISP's sales department answered all our questions, and our calls! They even called us back. Once our order was processed, installers came to run the wires and jacks. Now, with a

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